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FORUM: GENDER, RACE, AND CLASS IN CARIBBEAN FAMILY RELATIONS

Heidi Härkönen

INTRODUCTION

In October 2018, the Hodder Education publisher in the United Kingdom decided to retract an Assessment and Qualifications Alliance (AQA) General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE, 9-1) Sociology textbook that discussed family relations in diverse parts of the world because the book was seen to contain racist stereotypes about Caribbean families (BBC 2018; Badshah 2018). There was a public outcry and critiques stated that the book's decontextualized portrayal of Caribbean families is 'dangerous' (BBC 2018) and full of 'sweeping generalisations' (Badshah 2018). The text in the book reads as follows:

In Caribbean families, the fathers and husbands are largely absent and women assume the most responsibility in childrearing. When men and women live together, it is usually in cohabiting or common law relationships that reproduce the traditional patriarchal division of labour. The family system is also characterised by child-shifting, that is, the passing of children to other relatives or acquaintances if the parents find themselves unable to take care of them.

As a result, multiple women are involved in childhood socialisation. (Cited in BBC 2018).

The history of racism and hypersexualisation of Afro-Caribbean persons and the contemporary increases in racism, sexism, and xenophobia make it understandable that people are quick to react to such portrayals. At the same time, we should give careful thought to why there is a need to justify and contextualize exactly these kinds of relationships that resonate with long-term anthropological discussions on Caribbean matrifocality (Clarke [1957] 1974; R. T. Smith 1960; 1988; 1996; M. G. Smith 1962; 1965; Solien de Gonzalez 1965; Barrow 1996). In 2018, when people live in all kinds of different family relationships all around the world, why is it a problem if people in the Caribbean are portrayed as living in relationships that differ from the legally married nuclear family? Why is there an outcry to represent Caribbean family relations as contextualised and not to contextualise also all the other family relations in the book?

It is indeed this selective use of calls for contextualisation that I find disturbing in this

discussion on Caribbean families. Contextualisation is always important, not just when discussing Caribbean kinship: all family relations are the result of particular historical trajectories. Legal marriages and nuclear families are equally the product of specific historical and cultural circumstances (Collier 1997; Hirsch & Wardlow 2006). It is problematic to portray Caribbean matrifocality as if it were some kind of social deviation created by colonialism, plantation slavery, and poverty, and not a valuable way to organise social relationships in itself. Such requests to 'contextualise' Caribbean matrifocality may reveal the background assumption that something must have gone wrong at some point in history if people do not live in nuclear families and engage in legal marriages. But the problem here arises from the bourgeois notion of respectability that fails to create space for people to live in all kinds of relationships. If school books only start to show people as living in stable nuclear families based on legal marriages, our understanding of humanity becomes greatly diminished.

On the basis of my long-term ethnographic research on gender and kinship amongst low-income, racially mixed Cubans, the book's portrayal of Caribbean family relations does not sound totally erroneous, although it is true that there is more variation in family relationships than what the text states. There are regional, racial, class-related, and generational differences and variation amongst the diverse Caribbean islands and the Caribbean diaspora elsewhere. In Cuba, despite of matrifocality's historical roots as an Afro-Caribbean social formation (Martinez-Alier 1974), the racial distribution of matrifocal relationships seems to be more complex. Helen Safa (2005) has argued that the Cuban revolution has increased the prevalence of matrifocality throughout the country.

Amongst my *Habanero* interlocutors, the matrifocal orientation did not concern only the family relations of Afro-Cuban or racially mixed people, but also of low-income, white people. I have also met middle class, white Cubans, whose relationships are matrifocal, although family relations do vary amongst Cubans and in different parts of the country.

Matrifocality also varies over time. In my research, I have focused not on explaining 'why' my Cuban interlocutors' relationships are matrifocal, but rather in exploring how the matrifocal emphasis organizes people's family and love relations differently at diverse points of the life course (Härkönen 2016). This variation becomes particularly relevant when discussing the issue of 'missing' men in matrifocal families.

Numerous researchers have pointed out the important role that mothers play in Caribbean families in various parts of the region (e.g. Clarke 1974; Smith 1994; Andaya 2014; Härkönen 2016). At the same time, scholars have shown that while men may be 'marginal' as fathers and husbands, they are strongly present as brothers and uncles (Barrow 1998). Amongst my Cuban interlocutors, as people's relationships change over their life course and they circulate from one household to another, these shifts in kin relations are importantly gendered: women and children usually circulate together whilst men circulate by themselves (Härkönen 2014; 2016). In such circulation, men sometimes lose contact with their children or their relations may become greatly diminished when they no longer share a household with the child's mother. I have met many Cuban men who have little or no contact with their children, but I have also met Cuban men of all ages who are committed, loving fathers. Due to this variation, amongst my Cuban friends, most men, some of whom had little or no relationship with their biogenetic

children, usually played significant roles as step-fathers to their new partner's children, as people moved on in their relationships after separating from their previous partner. At an older age, some men who had lost contact with their children earlier in life, got a new chance to recuperate their relationships. While some of my interlocutors lived in stable nuclear families, most of my friends were engaged in wide networks of 'blood' (*sangre*) kin and in varying family arrangements as step-parents and partners that changed considerably over time.

The issue of child circulation, for which the book's portrayal was criticised, is a part of this dynamic character of Caribbean family relations. Although most Cuban women that I know have raised their own children, they have simultaneously received significant help from their mothers, sisters, aunts, and their partner's female kin in caring for their children. I also know some Cubans, both young and elderly, who have been raised by someone else than their birth mother. While individual situations vary, we should be careful with automatically seeing such arrangements as problematic, as they show the inclusive, flexible character of Caribbean kin relations, whereby caring responsibilities are shared beyond biogenetic connections and where not just biogenetic connections, but also on-going caring practices, create and reproduce kinship (Stack 1974; Härkönen 2016).

Possibly due to the close connection between women and children, the GSCE book represents Caribbean family relations as based on a 'traditionally patriarchal division of labour' (BBC 2018). Nevertheless, this aspect seems have received less attention amongst the book's critics. While it is true that amongst my *Habanero* interlocutors, women were mainly responsible for children and nurturing care whilst men were expected to contribute money

and other material items to their partners and children, I still would not call their relationships 'patriarchal'. Even though many women complained about *machismo* and men had significant gendered power in multiple areas, women also had considerable agency in many ways. For example, my Cuban female friends all had some money, work, and a source of income of their own, even though many of them simultaneously depended on their partner's material contributions to make ends meet. Some women were the main breadwinners of their families. Many of my Cuban female friends owned their homes and even those who did not, had considerable power over their households and were usually able to negotiate with their male partners. My Cuban female interlocutors also had a considerable amount of sexual agency and they could both initiate and terminate relationships. They had important reproductive agency; while women complained about male *machismo* when it came to contraception, if they became pregnant, they were the ones to decide whether to keep the child or not, and had primary rights over their children as mothers. All of these forms of agency deviate from 'traditional' ideas of patriarchy.

In addition to enabling various forms of female agency, matrifocal family relations differ from traditional patriarchal ideas also by their low degree of legal marriage. The absence of legal marriage in the book's portrayal of Caribbean families was another issue that generated public criticism. However, this portrayal resonates with my ethnographic data; few of my *Habanero* friends were legally married. Some had dating relationships, others lived together in a consensual union for varying time periods, some were legally married but more often for pragmatic reasons (such as securing a state pension to the widow at the

event of the partner's death) than for the social significance of legal marriage as such. Since the early 1960s, the Cuban government has tried to promote legal marriage and more stable family relations in the country, but many people still prefer to avoid formalities in their relationships. However, in contemporary Cuba, amongst large-scale political and economic changes, legal marriage seems to be gaining new social significance as a class-based ideal despite of the actually diminishing marriage rates (Härkönen 2017; ONE 2017). Resonating with such ideas, the criticism of the book's portrayal of Caribbean families as engaging in consensual rather than legalised marital relations, seems to be driven by a preoccupation with bourgeois standards of respectability, whereby legal marriage is conceptualised as the universally desirable relationship norm.

I find this development worrying because representing legal marriage as an ideal way to organise family relations risks stigmatizing and marginalizing people like my Cuban friends, who are unwilling or unable to enter into legal marriage. As researchers, our job is to break racialized and gendered stereotypes, not to promote them. At the same time, if we fail to make room to discuss variation in understandings and practices of family, gender and sexuality amongst people in different contexts, we seriously risk in creating narrowly defined portrayals of human life and in such a way contributing towards social marginalization ourselves. As an anthropologist who is deeply committed to taking my ethnographic findings seriously, I find it important to make space in our writing for the entire range of diverse ways in which people organise their families, their love lives and their caring relations.

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HEIDI HÄRKÖNEN
ACADEMY OF FINLAND POST-DOCTORAL
RESEARCHER
SOCIAL AND CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF HELSINKI
heidi.harkonen@helsinki.fi